

Life is short.
Do stuff
that matters

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A Winning Strategy for Teamwork

By Executive Director Shawn Ryan



With the end of summer, a hallowed tradition returns to football stadiums and living rooms across the country. There is a reverence with which fans don their team colors, pack their tailgating coolers and fire up the grills. A hardcore fan can spout stats, rankings, scores and regale listeners with stories of plays from seasons long past. Some can identify not just the team roster but also rattle off the entire coaching staff.

To be sure, coaches develop a following of their own. My wife's alma mater, the University of Florida, has Steve Spurrier. Florida State has Bobby Bowden, and the University of Georgia recently honored Vince Dooley at their home opener. While each of these coaches have achieved legendary status in his own right, any coach worth his or her salt knows they are not alone in driving a team to success. Other staff members coach offense, defense, running backs and strength training, but at the end of the day, the win is what matters. The players' success is what matters. The same philosophy applies to our clients.

Internally, our counselors, counselor assistants, assistive work technology staff and many others play an invaluable role, helping our clients identify their goals and putting needed supports in place along the way. Sometimes, these supports come in the form of referral to a provider who has the ability to deliver expertise we do not have in house. When these providers join us in the mission of supporting our clients, they become a part of the team. It no longer matters who gets the credit, as long as that client is scoring.

At Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA), we are implementing substantial changes. You could say our game strategy is shifting significantly. Earlier this month, we announced the addition of our new Director of Provider Relations. Sheila Pierce comes to us with significant experience in government and partner relations, communications and planning. We are proud to have her on our team.

In addition, I have been clear about our philosophy with regard to providers and partners. Just as our field staff are crucial to client success, so are other stakeholders. With a renewed commitment to strong partnerships, we are working toward consistent standards and processes, so that we all understand expectations and direction. We must all coach with the same strategy.

Directional changes are never easy and never quick, but I believe we are on a path that is right for our clients. Please join us this season as we tackle this together.



Get to Know a Legislator

This Month We Feature Darlene Taylor



In 1979, Darlene Taylor relocated to Thomasville from Miami, Florida. She will tell you it was one of the best things she has ever done. She loves Thomasville. From the start, she has been

active in many aspects of the community. She is an entrepreneur and has built two employee benefit management companies over the past three decades.

Darlene is very active in her church, First Baptist Church of Thomasville. She has taught Sunday school and led Bible study groups. She is also serving a second term on the board of the Thomas County Department of Family & Children Services. Her past service includes being a member of the first Thomas County Citizens Academy and the 1994 Chamber Leadership 2000 Class.

Darlene has served on the Board of the Thomasville-Thomas County Chamber of Commerce. She was the 1996 Chairwoman for the local Chamber's Women's Forum. She has served on the Advisory Board for Archbold Home Health Services and is a past member and president of Granada Garden Club.

Professionally, Darlene has been a member of the Society of Benefit Administrators, the Self-Insurance Institute of America, a Charter Member of the SelfFunding Academy, is listed in the National Directory

of Who's Who in Executives and Professionals and is a member of the National Association of Female Executives.

Darlene is a member of Health Underwriters and frequently lectures and teaches the fundamentals of employee benefits and self funding. Darlene's career has taken her far beyond where she ever expected to be.

In addition to her own company, she has worked with several employers, including a Fortune 500 Company in the management of employee benefits. In 1987, along with her partner, she started Administrative Claim Service (ACS). They began providing third-party administrator (TPA) services for several local employers. With a strong emphasis on service, the business grew from six accounts to over 100, when in 1997 the highly successful TPA was sold to a larger administration firm.

Darlene has continued to work in the TPA business serving as vice president of client services for two large national firms. In late 2001, with a recognizable need for a real customer focused TPA, Darlene, along with her son, John began Taylor Benefit Resource, Inc (TBR).

But, of all of her successes, her family is what she holds most dear. She has been married to John Taylor for 40 years and has two successful sons and four grandchildren (with a new one on the way).



Success!

GVRA Helps Several Clients Make Big Strides

By Communications Specialist Tom Connolly

Katelyn Krause, Deborah Wilson and Justin Sims are living their own version of the American dream, and they all credit GVRA for helping them get there.

Katelyn, who lives in Eastman, sought services from the agency because she felt she lacked the training needed to move up in the workforce. Her counselor, Angie Watkins, helped her move through the process, and as a result of VR's assistance and Katelyn's hard work, she was hired as a housekeeper at Eastman Healthcare & Rehab. In this capacity, she earns eight dollars an hour and works full-time.

She said she was satisfied with the services she received and would definitely recommend VR to anyone who has a disability and who wants to work.

Deborah, who is from Thomasville, was served by Counselor Catherine Beaty who assisted her throughout her time with VR. With Catherine's help, VR provided diagnosis and treatment, assistive work technology evaluation, purchasing of necessary tools and equipment and Community Work Adjustment Training (CWAT). Deborah also received job placement assistance, job follow-up, interpreter services and vision services, as well as hearing and speech language pathology services.

Because of VR's involvement, Ms. Wilson was able to secure employment at Walmart in Thomasville. At this facility, she works as a stock clerk on the sales floor. As such, she

works 35 hours a week and earns \$315 weekly.

Justin, who lives in Albany, was served by Counselor Perth Robinson. Perth, who described Justin as "quiet, humble and self-assured," provided Justin with vocational rehabilitation counseling and guidance, job readiness training, job placement assistance, job follow-up assistance and transportation.

As a result of the agency's assistance, Justin was able to find employment at Goodwill of Albany. There, Justin works as a donor greeter. In this capacity, he works 25 hours a week at \$9.25 an hour.

Justin said he was "happy" with his experience with the agency, further saying that he would gladly recommend GVRA to anyone with a disability who is seeking employment.

On the whole, these three individuals are just a few of the thousands of Georgians GVRA helps every year. While their stories are special, they are not unique. Everyday, Georgians with disabilities continue or begin their careers because of the assistance from the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency and its staff.



One Step at a Time

A Journey Towards Independence

By Communications Manager John P. Boan

Children become independent in different ways and at different times. Just ask a parent. It can seem that one day, they're in a car seat, and the next, they're asking to borrow the car. And sometimes, depending on the kid, they go halfway around the world for the summer to study physics.

The latter of these took Dee Reising by surprise. She knew her son Kieran had a knack for physics. That was evident by the fact that it was his chosen major at Georgia College and State University, which itself wasn't much of a surprise at all.

"He's a thinker. He's always thinking about how things are created, and he's always loved science and math," Dee said. "He's interested in the concept of the universe and how it started and what it can do and where we came from."

The decision to travel to Glasgow this past summer marked a new level of independence for Kieran, a stark departure from the young boy who resisted change and transition at every turn. Kieran, who was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder at a young age, first began to really turn a corner in high school, Dee said. There, he was presented with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which was ultimately aimed at helping him make the transition from the highly-structured environment of high school to the more rigorous challenges of college. As part of his plan, it was suggested by his school guidance counselor that he reach out to GVRA. Kieran worked with vocational rehabilitation staff to ensure that he had what he would need to make the next step. Services included helping him afford assistive technology and books, as well as therapy related to accepting and dealing with change. And it couldn't have

worked any better, Dee said. Over time, Kieran grew out of his shell, and when the time came to head to college, Dee said she knew he was ready.

"Change can be hard, and we really wanted a smooth transition so he could be as successful as possible," she said. "He was anxious about it ... but he was very excited and felt like he was not being ostracized for who he was. I could tell that was exciting to him."

Kieran's excitement about his future only grew once he got to GCSU in Milledgeville. After arriving on campus, he dove headfirst into his studies, and as a result, opportunities began to surface that he would've once only dreamed of. In early 2019, he was given the opportunity to study for the summer at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, and he jumped at the chance.

"It's amazing to see what he can do when he puts his mind to it," Dee said.

Following his return from the U.K., Kieran transferred to Georgia Tech. He's still studying physics, and he's still chasing his dream. None of it would have happened, Kieran said, without the help of GVRA and all those who came together to support him.

"GVRA has provided me with many great opportunities to make connections in the field of physics," he said. "This program has provided me the opportunity to receive a very strong education. I'm very thankful."



Kieran Reising is a GVRA client who recently travelled to Scotland to continue his study of physics. He is currently enrolled at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. Both Kieran and his mother Dee credit GVRA for helping Kieran succeed in college, and his entire team is excited about what lays in store for the young man.



Congratulations!

DAS Employee of the Month

The following nomination was submitted by Cathy Chafin in the category of Customer Service.

I would like to nominate Ms. Ella Johnson for Employee of the Month. I received a phone call from Ms. Johnson's claimant on August 6. The claimant called because she was upset with the Field Office, but during our conversation she expressed how grateful she was to have Ms. Johnson as her adjudicator.

She said each time she has spoken with Ms.

Johnson, she is helpful and professional, providing her with excellent customer service.

Ms. Johnson provides great customer service to her claimants, as evidenced above, but also by maintaining a low caseload size and aged case percentage. She received a rating of exceptional in both areas on her last evaluation.

I am pleased to acknowledge her accomplishments and nominate her for Employee of the Month.

Playing Host

National Training Comes to GVRA

The Georgia Association of Disability Employees (GADE) hosted the 2019 National Association of Disability Examiners (NADE) National Training Conference in Atlanta in late August. GADE welcomed Social Security Administration (SSA) representatives, disability examiners and disability support staff from across the nation to share ideas, grow professionally and increase their knowledge of the SSA disability program.

The following DAS staff and contractors

volunteered their time and talents to make the conference successful: Rita McWhorter, Ayanna Conley, Kathy Officer-Fogie, Tonya Scott, Susan Lloyd, Michael Pringle, Antonio Andrews, Joellen Chapman, Angela Underwood, Avis Phipps, Nancy Goodwin, Margaret Anderson- King, Justin Richardson, Joe Phinazee, David Lloyd, Jeanine Prayor, Kimberly Carlyle, Dr. George Ude and Dr. Alawode Oladele.



Root, Root, Root for the Braves

How One Client Keeps Braves Fans Happy

By Communications Manager John P. Boan

Katie Hearn recently changed offices, just down the hall from her old office. As a rule, change for anyone can take a quick second to adjust. In Katie's case though, the change required a little more than simply hanging art on the walls and getting office supplies organized. Several years ago, Katie lost her eyesight, and so changes in her commute, even if it's a matter of a few hundred feet, require adaptation that many of us take for granted. So how long did it take her to adjust?

"Maybe a few days," she said. "It helps if I can get a mental map of it, and then it's just doing it enough that it becomes second nature."

Katie has done a lot of learning since she started work with the Atlanta Braves in 2016, and the vast majority of it has had little to do with navigating the office or the intricacies of the infield fly rule. Katie heads a team during every home game that monitors all the Braves' social media platforms. If someone fires off a Tweet complaining about the long lines at the ice cream station by the third base concourse, her team redirects more staff members to that area. If someone needs help navigating the twists and turns of Suntrust Park, her team helps them with directions.

"So much of what we do is listening to the community. Listening to people," she said. "Learning what we can do better and then doing it."

It was Katie's ability to engage with the fan community that helped propel her to where she is today. When she first started with the Braves, she was only part time, oftentimes

stationed at one of the gates handing out programs as people shuffled into the park. This gave her a great opportunity to chat with fans from all over the southeast who made the pilgrimage to the home of the Braves. From there, she made the leap to Digital Services Representative, a member of the team that she now heads up. By January of this year, her ability to both connect with fans and uphold the mission and values of the Atlanta Braves put her in line for a promotion, and she was moved to the role she currently occupies.

If it weren't for the spur-of-the-moment decision on a cold evening in February 2016 to apply to be a part of the game-day staff, her path would have looked quite a bit different. At the time, Katie, who had recently graduated from LaGrange College, was teaching at a local high school and coaching softball on the side. But it wasn't for her. So she decided to make a change, and it quickly paid off.

"I fell in love with it," she said. "It was exciting being a part the Braves organization and getting to meet so many new people."

In February 2017, around the time of a certain Super Bowl that Atlanta sports fans won't soon forget, Katie's vision began to rapidly decline, and it became clear that things were going to change quickly, and she needed to adapt just as quickly if she was going to keep up. In April and May of that year, Katie went through five surgeries. With her condition stabilized, her ophthalmologist



had a single question. What now? The answer, Katie said, was easy.

"Once my vision loss happened, there was nobody that was going to tell me I wasn't going to go back. I was going to work as hard as I could to make sure that I could go back," she said. "I was going to try, and everybody here supported me every step of the way."

In addition, to the support from the Braves organization, Katie knew that she would need help adjusting to her disability, and her ophthalmologist recommended services from the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. With VR support, Katie learned how to navigate the world with the aid of her trusty service dog Jack. In addition, she received assistive technology support. Her job very much relies on the use of the social media, and Katie learned how to engage with fans online using voice-to-text programs.

All of this, of course, wasn't easy. There was the anxiety of wondering if she could do the work. The fear that people would treat her differently. At the end of the day, though, Katie knew that she had one tool that could open any lock. Trust in herself.

"I think that being confident in yourself and knowing your importance to yourself is the biggest part. I remember when I first started training, I was a little bit meek. But if I go in there and don't believe I can do it, nobody else is going to believe I can do it either" Katie said. "So you got to go in there and believe in yourself. It starts with you."

Her success and determination in overcoming adversity did not go unnoticed. Earlier this year, Katie made the trek to Midtown Manhattan where she told her story on The Today Show. Was she nervous? Of course, but her worries were less centered around the interview itself than they were when it came to where Jack would be able to use the bathroom. Talking

to people comes easy to her. It's what she does and what she loves.

So, if you find yourself at SunTrust Park as the Major League Baseball postseason draws near and need some assistance, pull out your phone and send a message to any number of the Braves' social media accounts. Katie and her team will be on the other end of the conversation. And they'll be more than happy to help.





Katie Hearn is a client who works for the Atlanta Braves. Through hard work and determination, Katie was able to find success in the workplace and inspire many others along the way.





Program Overview

Which path will your client take?

Send Referrals to our
NEW EMAIL

rws.csc.referrals@gvs.ga.gov

The center at Roosevelt Warm Springs is a CARF-accredited vocational rehabilitation program housed within GVRA. The programs and services offered at RWS help clients achieve their vocational goals. If your client is interested in the programs offered at RWS, email rws.csc.referrals@gvs.ga.gov.

Direct Entry

For clients that are interested in targeted programs and do not need the full Roosevelt Academy Program.

- Industry Recognized Certifications
- Employment Planning & Job Placement

Jump Start

For clients that need help in choosing a work goal based upon self-awareness and actual work exposure.

- Comprehensive Strengths Based Assessment and Evaluation
- Hands-on Situational Evaluation in Real-World Workplaces
- Declaration of an Employment Goal Based on Strengths, Needs and Interests

The Roosevelt Academy

For clients that are interested in increasing skills and independence in daily living activities, developing interpersonal skills, self determination and preparing for employment.

- Life Centered Education
- Academic Education
- Driver Evaluation, Education & Training
- Industry Recognized Certifications
- Employment Planning & Job Placement
- Comprehensive Support Services

STEP (Short Term Evaluation Program)

For clients that are seeking specific answers about their unique strengths and needs.

- Vocational assessment services
 - Comprehensive vocational evaluations
 - Discovery Profiles
 - Career Exploration
- Neuropsychological Evaluation
- Psychoeducational Evaluation

Way to Go!

RWS Hosts Employee of Quarter Celebration



Mitch Sanders (above) was recently named Employee of the Quarter at Roosevelt Warm Springs. In addition, longtime veterans of GVRA were also recognized. From left below, they include Pam Stewart-5 Years, Paulette Johnson-10 years and Tina McClendon-30 years. Congratulations, all.



**Alone we can do
so little.
Together we can
do so much.
~ Andrew Carnegie**

It Takes a Village

Everything GVRA does is a team affair. Across the state, hundreds of coworkers work together to ensure that the thousands of Georgians who walk through our doors every year have the tools they need to start new careers or continuing already-established ones.

This newsletter is the same in that it requires many people working together to make it successful. More and more, we're trying to tell the stories of these clients, how they worked with GVRA to achieve what they set their minds to.

That's where you come in. If you know of someone whose story needs to be told, please share it with us. If there's anything you'd like included in future issues, please email john.boan@gvs.ga.gov.

www.gvs.ga.gov

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